

Research on the Changing Perspectives on Romantic Love among Chinese International Students at the University of Toronto

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Abstract: In the era of globalization, many Chinese students study abroad. As a University of Toronto student, the author is interested in the romantic love narratives of Chinese international students. These students are more confident in expressing emotions and have different views on marriage compared to their parents, leading to a sense of contradiction. By applying an individualist perspective, this research carefully studies the love narratives of Chinese international students at the University of Toronto. The interview in this study carefully curated questions about discussing a conflict in romantic relationships, disclosing the core perspectives towards romantic relationships between couples. This paper adopts the individualism approach by which the author can further explore the micro perspective. The study shows that Chinese international students' pursuit of happiness in romantic relationships is not an isolated endeavor but is deeply entwined with broader social and cultural contexts, requiring a delicate balance between individual fulfillment and collective harmony. This research illuminates the complex interplay between individual agency and societal norms in shaping perceptions of love, offering valuable insights for future research aimed at unraveling the multifaceted dimensions of romantic relationships across cultural contexts.

Keywords: Romantic love, Individualist perspective, Chinese international students, Toronto.

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, an increasing number of Chinese students are choosing to study abroad in search of a broader knowledge perspective and richer personal experiences. As a student at the University of Toronto, the author is intrigued by the narrative of romantic love among Chinese international students. Through observation, they have become more confident in expressing their emotions and are no longer hesitant to reveal their true selves. Moreover, their attitudes towards marriage have significant differences from their parent's generation. Marriage is no longer seen as an inevitable life choice; instead, they place greater emphasis on personal happiness and the authenticity of their emotions. However, this "modern" pursuit of personal love and emotions conflicts with the "traditional" values of stability and family harmony that are prevalent in China[1] Consequently, many international students experience a sense of contradiction in their self-concept and identity. At the same time, the author has observed that different international students adopt varied approaches

to deal with this contradiction. They either explicitly or implicitly resist the inertia of their cultural background or compromise with “traditional” values. The research paper aims to explore the love narratives of Chinese international students at the University of Toronto, including their perception of love, partner selection criteria, and the influence of external factors. It uses the lens of materiality and a micro-interactive perspective to understand the interplay between cultural exposure, personal development, and beliefs. The individualist perspective provides the researcher with a powerful tool to break down the binary approach as proposed by Victor C. De Munck and David B. Kronenfeld [2]. Previous research on love narratives has broken down binary categorization but neglected Chinese international students. This research develops the love narrative of this minority group and adopts an individualism approach to study the micro perspective. It also examines the complex interplay between individual agency and societal norms in shaping perceptions of love, with contributions to understanding romantic relationships across cultural contexts.

2. Methodology

This research focuses on exploring the love narrative among a certain ethnic group on campus. The population of this research project is Chinese International students at the University of Toronto. The author started to look for my participants on February 10th. The interview process happened between February 24th- 29th, 2024. In the meanwhile, transcript processing and coding were conducted in parallel with the interview. The data process was finished on March 10th. Semi-structured Interviews were conducted for this research. An interview guide was constructed to guide the interview process and is designed to answer the interview questions. Open-ended questions were asked during the interview process, and the duration of each interview was held between 40-60 minutes.

This research employed convenient sampling and snowball sampling to select interviewees from the population. These methods were implemented since there was a lack of resources and limited time. Initially, The author found four participants (lmx, wyz, yy, and dsh). When asking some potential participants to interviewees, some preferred not to share their relationship with an interviewer. This problem was solved by introducing snowball sampling which helps to enlarge the pool of potential participants. One of the participants, lmx, asked some of her friends who were suitable for the research and then asked if they were able to participate (zze, and wyz py). After participants were found, what this research was about was introduced, and the policy that everything that happened in the interview would be completely anonymized was announced. Following the process, consent forms were handed to them and they were told that everything was going to be recorded with their consent. The content will only be seen by the TA, the professor, and the researcher.

In total, 6 participants were found. Among them, 2 are male and 4 are female. The age of the interviewees is between the range of 21-22. As our research question focused on Chinese international students, all of them are Chinese and are heterosexual with at least one romantic relationship experience. There are some diversities in their experiences abroad, some went to Singapore when they were young, some came to Canada when they were in high school, and the rest came to Canada for undergraduate education.

The interview began by asking for the background information of the participants and their romantic relationships, through which the researcher was able to grasp an initial understanding of their love experience. Then questions on a certain relationship were asked to gradually delve into participants’ love narratives. Questions asked were mainly about how they found the partner, the criteria for choosing a partner, and a recent conflict. As the conflict was another main research question, the discussion on a recent conflict unfolded into details such that the theme of the source of the conflict and how the participants coped with the conflict was exposed. From what had been covered, this research was able to unearth the family and culture’s influence on the participants’ love narrative.

Employing grounded theory methodology, an initial phase of open coding was undertaken. Throughout this phase, recurrent concepts and salient attributes, including "economic status" and "No drugs," were accentuated and transformed into open codes. Subsequently, prevalent features discernible across the majority of the transcripts were identified, organized, and encoded into focused codes. Building upon the focused codes, themes were systematically developed, reflecting the underlying patterns and concepts present within the data. These themes and codes play a pivotal role in addressing the central research question, providing a structured framework for analysis and interpretation. Analytical memos were written after the coding process was finished. The memos served as a reminder of important findings in the interview and coding process and also as clues to conduct data analysis.

Being a part of this unique demographic offers author an insider's view, enabling a deeper understanding of the nuanced shifts in romantic perceptions that occur when one navigates between Chinese cultural norms and those encountered in a Western context. This insider perspective allows to empathize with the emotional and psychological journeys, recognizing the subtle interplay of cultural identity, adaptation, and resistance that define these experiences. Moreover, the author's position as both a researcher and a member of the community offers an authentic perspective to observe the dynamics of cultural integration and individual transformation.

3. Analysis

3.1. Love narrative

3.1.1. Criteria for choosing a partner

During the interview, two predominant criteria emerged, which are an absolute no for drugs, and a good appearance. In Canada, the use of selected drugs is decriminalized, which is a huge legislative difference from the Chinese law system. This difference is notably integrated into their criteria for partner selection. The prohibition against drugs is articulated by the respondents, "these (drugs) illegal things are not to be touched." The perception of drugs being addictive is succinctly captured in their unanimous declaration that "it's an addictive behavior, it will cause illusions." This stance delineates a clear boundary against drug use and reflects the profound influence of Chinese cultural norms on their romantic considerations.

A good appearance was also underscored as a criterion for partner selection by the interviewees. YY mentioned in the interview, "I prefer men who are 1.8 meters tall" while another interviewee (WYZ) similarly stated that her partner should be "at least 1.76 meters." The emphasis on height illuminates the social and evolutionary factors associated with physical attributes in mate choice. The preference for taller men can be interpreted through various lenses, including the social perception of attractiveness, evolutionary preference towards individuals, and culturally constructed ideals of masculinity and protection, shedding light on how criteria are built in a love narrative.

3.1.2. Expectations on social and economic status

A significant majority underscored the necessity for their partner to possess wealth. One respondent, identified as YY, stated that money serves as compensation for a partner's potential unfaithfulness. It is further illustrated by saying that: "his future salary will be, well, middle income, from a very practical perspective, money is very important." Similarly, another participant, WYZ, delineated her expectations regarding her partner's financial credentials, stipulating a precise annual income of "1.5 million RMB." Jankowiak[3] pointed out that individuals actively seek out and maintain social connections to affirm their presence in a broader society, often by building a large circle of friends. This anticipation of a substantial salary underscores the weight attributed to economic security,

reflecting societal valuations of financial stability and pragmatic considerations in the context of romantic engagements.

3.1.3. From romantic relationship to marriage

Perspectives on marriage among the interviewees exhibited significant variation. One interviewee articulated, "(I) believe that if two people don't marry for love, the future is even more uncertain". Conversely, interviewee YY posited that the bride price could compensate for a lack of love and create a sense of security: "About the bride price,..., my mom didn't say it must be a bride price, we don't have that custom,... But I told him, after these incidents, I felt very insecure. If I were to marry you, I think money is something that can give me a bit of security".

This dichotomy underscores the complexity of the interplay between love and material considerations in marital decision-making. On the one hand, the belief in love as the foundation of marriage reflects a romantic ideal that prioritizes emotional connection and compatibility as the cornerstone of a lasting relationship. On the other hand, monetary compensation highlights a pragmatic approach to marriage, where financial security is seen as a significant component of marital stability and personal security[4].

The divergence illustrates the varying degrees to which cultural traditions, personal experiences, and societal expectations influence individual attitudes toward marriage. The notion of bride price, although not universally practiced, serves as a mechanism for negotiating security and commitment in the marriage. Individuals navigate the intersection of love, materiality, and security, shaping their conceptions of marriage within a transnational context.

3.2. Coping with conflicts

3.2.1. Source of conflict

Both LMX and YY identified indecisiveness as a primary source of conflict within their relationships.

They recalled experiences wherein their boyfriends exhibited oscillation between different individuals (either ex-partners or subjects of affection) and discussed the emotional turmoil such behavior inflicted upon them. LMX mentioned that "One day...so I just checked on his phone. Then I saw...he said he still liked the girl from his middle school." This narrative highlights the psychological strain and relational instability induced by a partner's indecisiveness, particularly when the partner cheats.

Another observation from the interviews involving LMX and YY addresses behaviors associated with pickup artists (PUA) or gaslighting. LMX stated: "It's about him denying some of your values, making you feel like you have become a bad person." By invalidating someone's values, PUAs create an environment of insecurity and self-questioning, enabling one party to exploit over other for the advantage in the romantic relationships.

3.2.2. The process of coping with conflict

When coping with PUA, which is a conflict mentioned by most participants, strategies taken by different participants vary. Analyzing the process may shed light on how Chinese international students deal with conflicts without direct support from their families and away from cultural settings. LMX emphasized the significance of maintaining ample personal space. She elaborated, "I'm not very susceptible to PUAs, that's why I mentioned needing personal space earlier. This is because I need to reflect, I need to think.... When some people come over with PUA talk, I just think they're talking nonsense." This narrative underscores the critical role of self-reflection and the development of an independent mindset as defensive mechanisms against manipulative strategies, thus facilitating

a stronger sense of self and a fortified resistance to external influences. In contrast, interviewee YY employed a distinct approach in addressing PUA, as she articulated: "Now when he talks to me, I directly tell him, 'You're PUA-ing me.'" This strategy represents a confrontation and verbal acknowledgment of the manipulative behavior, serving as a mechanism to disarm the aggressor by explicitly naming and rejecting their tactics. By employing such direct communication, YY not only asserts her awareness of the underlying manipulative intentions but also establishes a boundary against such attempts at influence[5].

3.3. Family and culture's influence on love narratives

3.3.1. Family/ culture influence in choosing a partner

Interviewee WYZ believes that in her parent's generation, there was an expectation for a suitable match in terms of family background. She describes that "if the man couldn't provide most of the money for a house, it seemed unlikely for people to get married in that era." She also thinks that "actually, it's not much different from now." Another interviewee, YY, also agrees with this viewpoint. She says, "My parents definitely will focus on family conditions."

The insights provided by WYZ and YY, underscore the enduring significance of financial stability and familial background in marriage considerations across generations. This persistence suggests that, despite changes in societal norms and the economy, the capacity to contribute significantly towards home ownership remains a critical factor in marriage decisions. The emphasis on family background, as highlighted by the interviewees, points to a deeply entrenched social norm that favors certain familial connections and economic capabilities in the formation of marital unions.

3.3.2. Preference on Chinese or Asian partner

All interviewees articulated a preference for choosing a Chinese partner, with LMX attributing this choice to future planning considerations. LMX stated, "It's a matter of planning for the future. I plan not to be here, so... I wouldn't be in a relationship with people here (local people)." Conversely, the other two interviewees unanimously cited "there's a big cultural difference" as the most significant factor. WYZ elaborated, "I can't fully understand their family background or get to know it well, and their lifestyle habits might differ from ours (Chinese)." Additionally, YY observed, "They (Canadians) might think that such hugs between opposite sexes are nothing..., but Asians generally don't do that."

The collective inclination towards a Chinese partner among the interviewees underscores a nuanced interplay between cultural identity, future planning, and the perceived challenges of cross-cultural relationships[6]. LMX's perspective highlighted a pragmatic approach to building a relationship whereas other interviewees emphasized cultural differences as the primary issue. The emphasis on cultural disparities, as articulated by WYZ and YY, points to a deeper sense of cultural belonging and the difficulties of navigating relationships where fundamental values and lifestyle habits diverge. WYZ's concern about the challenge of mutual understanding between two cultural backgrounds underscores the importance of shared cultural experiences in forming intimate relationships. Similarly, YY's observation about differing perceptions of physical affection highlights specific cultural nuances that can influence comfort and boundaries in interpersonal interactions. The diversified reasons for choosing a Chinese partner illuminate the varied dimensions through which individuals navigate the complexities of intercultural relationships, where shared cultural backgrounds and pragmatic considerations both come into play[7].

4. Conclusion

This article examines Chinese international students' love narratives. It focuses on how cultural backgrounds and societal norms shape partner selection and relationship expectations. Key findings include a rejection of drug use reflecting Chinese cultural norms even in a country where drugs are decriminalized, importance of physical attributes and economic status in mate choice, and a complex interplay between love and material considerations in transitioning to marriage. In terms of conflicts theme, indecisiveness and pickup artist behaviors are sources of conflict, and strategies for dealing with them vary. The research also shows that individual agency and coping mechanisms develop in response to conflicts. The family and culture's influence on love narratives theme emphasizes the impact of familial and cultural expectations on partner selection and romantic preferences, with a preference for Chinese or Asian partners due to cultural differences and future planning. The study also shows the complexity of Chinese international students' romantic relationships, including the dual cultural background, personal desires versus familial and cultural inertia, and the intertwining of monetary and psychological factors. The research complements the study of love by investigating this minority group in Western society.

The article also discusses potential biases in a research study due to the researcher being from the same demographic as the participants and the use of convenient and snowball sampling methods. It points out the limitations of a small and restricted sample size in making comparisons with other groups. Future studies could improve by financing a large-scale study with diverse researchers and using more rigorous sampling techniques. Expanding the study to include a wider range of demographic variables and conducting a comparative study with partners from different cultural backgrounds could provide more insights. A longitudinal study could observe how romantic love narratives change over time when students adapt to different countries.

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